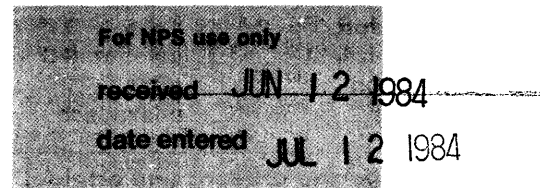


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections



1. Name

historic Austin, John Alexander House

and/or common Same

2. Location

street & number 290 S. Front Street N/A not for publication

city, town Memphis N/A vicinity of ~~Congressional district~~

state Tennessee code 047 county Shelby code 157

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
			<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Mrs. and Mrs. Kevin Rea

street & number 290 S. Front Street

city, town Memphis N/A vicinity of state Tennessee 38103

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Office of Shelby County Registrar

street & number 160 N. Main Street

city, town Memphis state Tennessee 38103

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title N/A has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date N/A N/A federal state county local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town N/A state N/A

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The John Alexander Austin House was designed and constructed as a two-and-one-half story Italianate townhouse with an L-shaped plan, load-bearing brick masonry walls and a low hip roof. The structure is situated on a low rise above the street grade of South Front (Shelby) Street and Pontotoc Avenue. The structure faces west on South Front Street and is situated primarily on an east/west axis with a side (southern) exposure along Pontotoc Avenue. A one-and-one-half-story brick carriage house is associated with the residence at the rear of the property.

The front (western) facade is three bays wide, with the front entrance located in the northernmost bay of the first floor. The windows of the first and second floors are covered by elaborate cast iron hoods that project slightly from the facade. The windows of the first floor extend to the floor and are double-hung sashes containing single lights. The windows of the second floor are 1 x 1 double-hung sash lights. Plain wrought iron balconets are placed at the bottom of each window of the facade, and appear to be additions from ca. 1930. Above the windows of the second floor are small segmental arched eyebrow windows covered with elaborate cast iron grills. At center is a small 1 x 1 double-hung sash light that is accommodated by a polygonal projection of the roof above the eaves. Both the larger window and the eyebrow windows let light and air into the undeveloped attic of the structure. String courses of brick and stone delineate the levels of the building at the sill, the second floor level, and the attic floor level.

The front entrance composition is dominated by a large, polygonal hood supported by large, plain triangular brackets. The hood appears to date from ca. 1930. Neither physical nor photographic evidence has been located to indicate the original appearance of the entrance. The entrance door is located in a slight recess featuring fine Victorian moldings and side panels. The doorway features a hinged transom, with rope molding running around the jam. The door contains a single-light panel with applied rope moldings and two square panels below.

The roof of the structure was substantially altered in ca. 1930. Physical evidence indicates that the original roof was likely covered in metal, and had a wide overhang containing a built-in gutter system. In addition, "shadows" of cornice brackets appear in between the eyebrow windows of the attic. It is assumed that the roof renovation was caused by the deterioration and failure of the gutter system due to lack of routine maintenance. The existing roof likely follows many of the same lines as the original. The roof is currently covered with asphalt shingles.

The southern facade is divided into two halves--the western, more formal portion, and the eastern portion, which contains the brick core of the service wing, its frame porches and later additions. The western portion continues the lively Italianate design of the front facade and is dominated by a projecting, rectangular bay of two stories in height that is decorated with corbeled panels, arches, cornices and hoods. The brick masonry forms the majority of decoration in this area of the facade and demonstrates a high level of craftsmanship. Windows are visible on two sides of the bay, though a third side is now obscured by a later addition. Windows throughout this area are 2 x 2 double-hung sash lights capped by segmental arches. Segmental arched foundation window vents are visible beneath the

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet Austin, John Alexander House Item number 7

Page 2

sill, covered by cast iron grills. A circular arched bull's eye attic window is featured in the gable end above the projecting bay. The window is also covered by a grill.

The two-story service wing is four bays in width though only two bays from the original brick core are exposed at center. Both exposed levels feature segmental arched, four panel doors and 2 x 2 double-hung sash lights. A seam in the middle of the exposed bays is visible and suggests the addition of more rooms to the core soon after the construction of the building.

The original frame porches stretched the full length of the service wing but are now reduced by half. Cast iron grills used as vents are the only major porch details that remain after the alterations. The porch was remodeled in ca. 1930 to accommodate bathroom or kitchen additions and an ornamental one-run fire stair and balustrade. The room additions are of frame construction covered with clapboard. The additions were placed on the original porch floors and contain windows with 2 x 2 double-hung sash lights. Original porch doors and windows have been covered over or opened up to provide access to the additions.

The rear (eastern) facade is a simple two bay brick composition with a one bay frame addition on the southern porches. Windows feature segmental arches and 2 x 2 double-hung sash lights. Doorways provide access to the basement and porch crawlspace.

The northern facade is mostly obscured by vines that have gone untended for many years. However, six 2 x 2 double-hung sash lights are visible on the first and second floors towards the rear of the structure.

The interior of the house was designed to follow a standard townhouse plan with the staircore and hall placed to the northern side. The main stair is a single run with a fine walnut handrail, polygonal newel and balusters. Rope moldings decorate the rail. A unique feature of the structure is a circular stained glass window placed at the head of the stair. The window is set in moldings that are contemporary with the rest of the moldings in the house, and is currently lit by an electric bulb. The original means of lighting is unknown.

The formal rooms of the first floor are surprisingly simple in their finishes. The formal parlor and sitting room are connected to the stair hall by sliding doors and are interconnected by sliding doors. The front parlor features a Colonial Revival mantle which was probably installed in ca. 1907. The sitting room contains a fine Victorian cast iron mantle that appears to be original to the property. Both rooms contain interior shutters for the tall windows. The sitting room has seen the addition of a small closet and a doorway to one of the ca. 1930 additions. To the east of the sitting room and parlor is the formal dining room, which is located in the service wing. The dining room is the most elaborate room in the structure and contains a complex cornice molding and floral ceiling medallion. Hall and closet additions have partially obscured the cornice. A Victorian mantelpiece and its tile insets remain intact. Rooms to the east of the dining room include the original pantry and kitchen, though most original details are now missing.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only
received
Date entered

Continuation sheet Austin, John Alexander House Item number 7

Page 3

The second floor contains the master bedrooms and servants quarters to the rear. The bedrooms contain original doors and moldings, though the fireplaces were remodeled with oak Colonial Revival mantles in ca. 1907. Parts of the stairhall and bedrooms have been altered to accommodate baths and closets.

The stair core to the attic contains its original finishes including rail, balusters and newel. The parts of the stair are of a much simpler design than the main stair. A unique feature of the upper stair core is a strip window at the apex that contains four single-light casement windows. The windows face east to provide light and ventilation for the structure. The attic is floored and unfinished.

Associated with the Austin House is a one-and-one-half story brick carriage house. The carriage house was unavailable for inspection, but appears to have been altered for a rental property in ca. 1930. The carriage house is gable roofed and faces west to the rear of the main residence on a north/south axis. The structure is four bays in width, with segmental arched windows, doors and carriage bays. The carriage bay arch was straightened in ca. 1930 when a box bay window was added to the southwestern corner. The windows and doors of the second floor are flat arched. A stair and balcony from ca. 1930 provides access to the second level.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates ca. 1876. **Builder/Architect** Unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The John Alexander Austin House (ca. 1876) is nominated under National Register criteria A, B, and C for its local architectural significance and its historical associations with the commercial and residential development of Memphis. The house stands today at 290 South Front Street as the sole surviving residential structure in the South Bluffs area of Downtown Memphis--an area once considered to be one of the most fashionable neighborhoods in the city. The structure is significant in its association with John Alexander Austin (1842-1906), who was an important, longtime manufacturer and retailer of men's clothing in the region. The Austin House is a rare and important local example of the Italianate townhouses that once graced a major portion of the Downtown and Medical Center areas of the city. Sadly, only nine such structures remain as a reflection of the radical change in the development patterns of the South Bluffs and the Center City areas of Memphis during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The residence was designed and built in 1876 for John Alexander Austin (1842-1906), who was a prominent manufacturer and retailer of men's clothing in Memphis and New York. Austin was born in Brownsville, Tennessee, and later served in the 31st Tennessee Regiment during the Civil War where he rose to the rank of Sergeant-Major. After the War, Austin traveled to New York and was employed by a clothing manufacturer. In 1872, Austin received an advance from his company and returned to Memphis to open his own business, "The Grand Palace" on South Main Street under the name of Grubb and Austin. The firm was re-organized in 1879 as Grubb, Austin and Berry, until 1883 when Austin purchased and operated the company with his brother Albert M. Austin and Alba C. Lake under the name of J. A. Austin and Co. By 1887 the company was doing business as a "manufacturer and wholesaler of clothing and gentleman's furnishing goods" from its four-story building at 323 Main Street. J. A. Austin also employed 45 workers and five salesmen in its Memphis location and its branch office at 318 Broadway in New York City.

J. A. Austin and Company incorporated in 1895 with J. A. Austin, Alba C. Lake, Albert M. Austin and W. B. Cleveland. The business continued to expand through the retirement of J. A. Austin in 1905. Albert M. Austin replaced Austin as president, with Alba Lake as vice-president. The firm remained as an important part of the Memphis retail environment until closing during the Great Depression.

J. A. Austin retired from the company to his home in 1905 due to ill health, and died less than a year later on March 21, 1906. After Austin's death, the property was inherited by John A. Austin, Jr. and A. M. Austin as trustees for the estate. The property remained in the hands of various members of the Austin family until the 1930s.

By ca. 1890 the South Bluffs area of Downtown Memphis had become a highly developed area of mixed uses--residential development was concentrated near South Front (Shelby) Street, retail commercial was concentrated along South Main Street to the east of the Austin property, and light industries and service related uses were concentrated to the west of South Front, especially in the area of Butler, Nettleton and Tennessee Streets. In spite of the diversity of land uses within the small South Bluffs area, the South Front (Shelby)

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Northwest Memphis, TN-ARK

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

1	5	7	6	8	1	2	0	3	8	9	2	1	8	0
Zone			Easting				Northing							

B

Zone			Easting				Northing							

C

Zone			Easting				Northing							

D

Zone			Easting				Northing							

E

Zone			Easting				Northing							

F

Zone			Easting				Northing							

G

Zone			Easting				Northing							

H

Zone			Easting				Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

11. Form Prepared By

name/title John L. Hopkins, Executive Director

organization Memphis Heritage, Inc.

date April 13, 1984

street & number 8 N. Third, Suite 615

telephone 901/529-9828

city or town Memphis

state Tennessee 38103

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Herbert L. Hays

title Executive Director, Tennessee Historical Commission

date 6/4/84

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the National Register

date 7/12/84

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet Austin, John Alexander House Item number 8

Page 2

Street neighborhood was considered to be a highly desirable area to live. According to early documents and later photographs, the area was first developed as early as ca. 1835, but reached its highest development in the quarter century following the Civil War. The photographs reveal a neighborhood composed of a diverse range of architectural styles, encompassing every major stylistic period from the Greek Revival through the entire range of the Victorian era.

The construction of the Frisco Railroad Bridge in 1892 across the Mississippi River began a slow but dramatic shift in the land use of the entire South Bluffs area. By 1900 much of the area south of Calhoun had been developed for railroad yards, shipping terminals and related concerns. The area north of Butler Street and west of Front Street became more highly developed for industrial and warehouse distribution facilities due to the proximity of the area between the railroad yards and the Downtown. New residential development followed the streetcar lines away from the Downtown and the South Bluffs to create the Midtown residential subdivisions of Estival Park, Annesdale-Snowden, Annesdale Park and others, which were in an area annexed by the City of Memphis in 1899. The lack of demand for residential uses on the South Bluffs escalated the conversion of the area to commercial uses. By ca. 1920, all of the land west of South Front Street had been developed for industrial and warehouse/distribution uses.

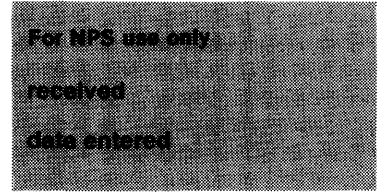
The history of the Austin House after the death of J. A. Austin is reflective of this dramatic change in the development pattern of the surrounding area. In spite of the attractive setting of the Austin House with its grand view of the Mississippi River, the members of the second generation of the family had families of their own and were occupying newer residences in the Midtown neighborhoods. Quite naturally, none were interested in returning to live in the family home. The home was converted to rental property in ca. 1907, and remained in use as a boarding house until the early part of 1984. Much of the residential character of the east side of South Front Street remained intact through the 1930s, though attrition slowly erased this character by ca. 1950 with the exception of the Austin House.

In spite of the neglect suffered by the Austin House for over seventy years, the structure remains surprisingly intact and well preserved. Interest in the redevelopment of the South Bluffs area has led to the purchase and planning for the rehabilitation of the building by its present owners. If successful the restoration and rehabilitation of the Austin House will guarantee the survival of the last indication of the South Shelby Street neighborhood, and of how quickly and completely change can occur in the dynamics of the urban environment.

The eight other brick townhouses remaining in Memphis are in the northeast section of the Downtown and include four buildings on Adams, two on Jefferson, and two on Poplar. The properties are at 238 Adams (Fowlkes-Boyle House, 1869, NR), 239 Adams (First James Lee House, 1869, NR), 246 Adams (James S. Toof House, 1875, NR), 253 Adams (H.H. Mette House, 1872), 669 Jefferson (1863, NR), 671 Jefferson (1863, NR), 648 Poplar (Bradford-Maydwell House, 1859, NR), and 670 Poplar (ca. 1880). The four buildings on Adams are more similar in design to the Austin House than are the houses on Jefferson and Poplar, which are somewhat plainer on their exteriors.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet Austin, John Alexander House Item number 9

Page 2

Major Bibliographic References:

Allison, John. Notable Men of Tennessee. Atlanta: Southern Historical Association, 1905 . v. II.

Goodspeed Brothers. History of Hamilton, Knox and Shelby Counties of Tennessee. Nashville: C. and R. Elder, 1974 .

Mathes, James H. Old Guard in Grey. Memphis: S. C. Toof Co., 1897 .

Memphis City Directories. R. L. Polk and Co., various date.

Memphis Commercial Appeal: March 21, 1906; July 23, 1923.

Memphis Historical and Descriptive Publishing Co., Memphis as She is. Memphis: Memphis Hist. and Descr. Pub. Co., 1887 .

Perry, Dorothy "Proposal for Research-290 South Front" (unpublished MS in possession of author, used with permission, no date).

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet Austin, John Alexander House Item number 10

Page 2

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundaries of the property included in the nomination are limited to existing property description, to wit:

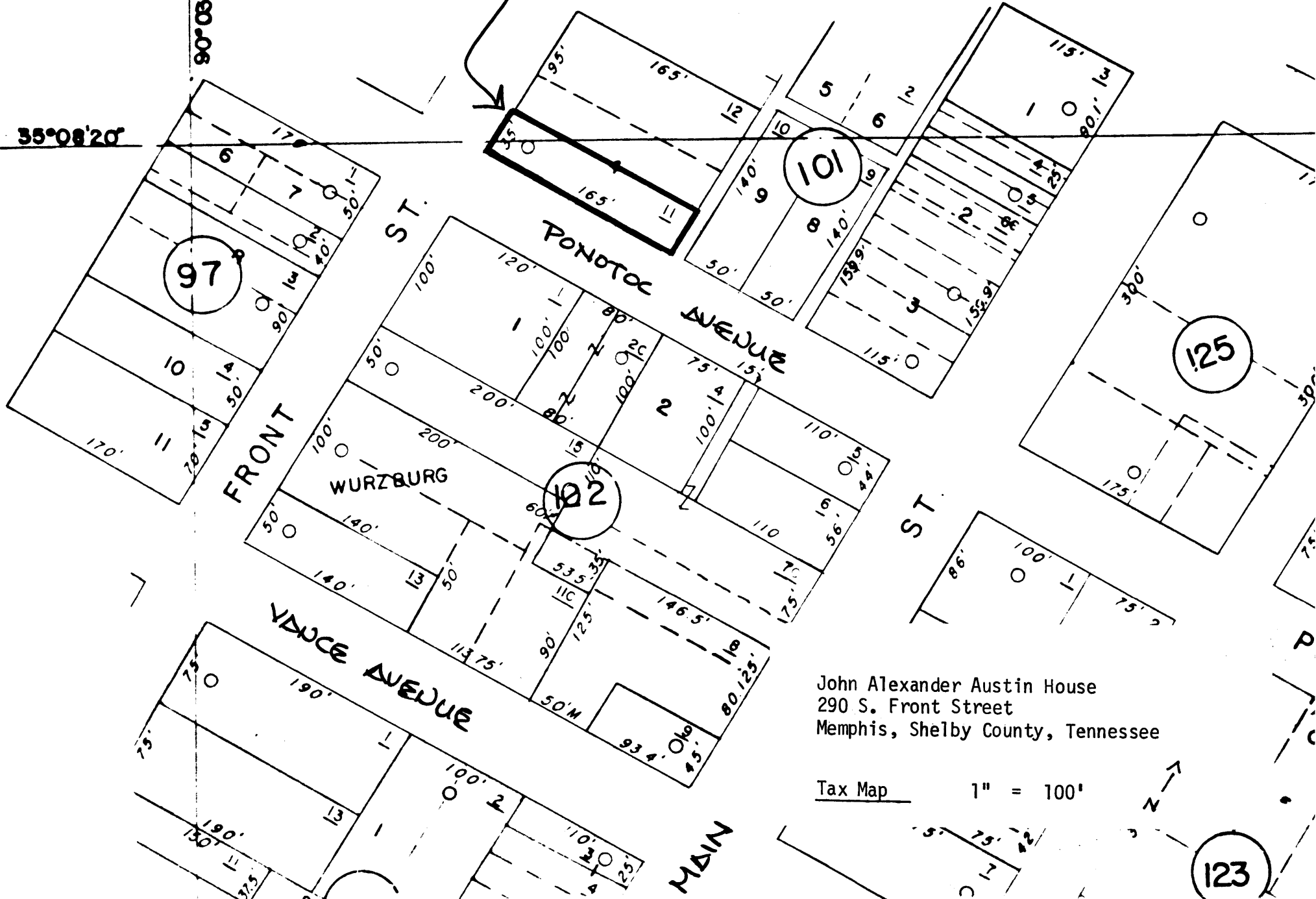
A parcel of land in the City of Memphis being the south half of lot four block 26 of the South Memphis Annexation, said property being 35 feet by 165 feet on the east side of South Front (Shelby) Street at its intersection with Pontotoc Avenue.

The nomination includes only the narrow city lot historically associated with the building.

290 SOUTH FRONT

35°08'20"

90°08'30"



John Alexander Austin House
290 S. Front Street
Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee

Tax Map 1" = 100'



123